Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 08-10-40
Week of March 3, 2008

SASKATCHEWAN COMPANY PROVES PIGS CAN FLY

Saskatchewan's pig genetics are about to make their mark on the world's largest market, thanks to a shipment of pigs to China.

Fast Genetics of Saskatoon recently shipped 866 pigs to Chengdu, China, where they will form the breeding nucleus of a joint venture company called Tianzow Foods.

"Fast Genetics is based in Saskatchewan, but our parent company is Hytek Ltd. from southern Manitoba," explained Fast General Manager Shannon Meyers. "It is a large pork-producing and processing company which has an equity interest in Tianzow Foods."

The pigs originated in the Fast Genetics facilities at Melfort and Spiritwood. Their journey took them first to Manitoba, then Chicago by truck, and finally on to China via jumbo jet.

"We did charter a Boeing 747 freightliner, which exclusively carried our pigs on this trip, requiring a flying time of about 20 hours," Meyers said.

Meyers says Tianzow Foods has acquired rights to distribute Fast Genetics in China. Tianzow is a vertically integrated company that owns pork production facilities, slaughtering and processing plants, and even a chain of retail meat stores. China offers a market of 1.3 billion people who love their pork, consuming a per capita average of 38 kilograms of pork per year.

"This is a sale where we look at the margins and make a business case to do this single shipment – but it's really greater than that in the potential for our company over the long-term, with all of the offspring that will come out of there into China," Meyers said. "The goal will be to both utilize the offspring in our internal operation and to sell genetics to other Chinese producers."

Even though Canada is considered a high health status exporter of live pigs, completing this transaction did not come without its challenges.

"These animals were blood-tested twice in Saskatchewan at our source farms," Meyers noted. "Then, they were moved to Manitoba and spent 49 days in quarantine, overseen by a Chinese government veterinarian, and blood-tested again. They are now in a Chinese quarantine for 45 days, and after a fourth consecutive clean blood test, the government will finally release them to their owner in China."

(more)

Fast Genetics owns 3,700 sows in genetic nucleus and multiplication production in Saskatchewan. Their genetics are found in sow herds and market hogs across Canada, the United States, Mexico, France and, now, China.

"When we look at the opportunities, we think they're great," Meyers said. "One of the reasons is that Saskatchewan is recognized as a great place to produce healthy breeding stock, because of the low density of hogs in the province. From an international standpoint, Saskatchewan is very well viewed as a preferred place to source breeding stock."

Meyers says Fast Genetics is planning to continue its international genetics export business.

"It's a huge undertaking and we have a great staff, who have a lot of commitment to doing it," he stated. "We're exploring other international opportunities, and now that we have this under our belt, our goal will be to get into other countries, as well."

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EARLY SPRING IS PRIME TIME FOR GOPHER CONTROL

The common gopher, known more formally as the Richardson's ground squirrel, has become an increasingly bothersome pest not only for the danger its burrows pose to livestock on pasture land, but increasingly as source of damage to crops.

"While many producers have used shooting or toxic baits like Rozol, their preferred method is grain treated with strychnine," says Cameron Wilk, Acting Provincial Manager of Field Services with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture. "After many years being unavailable, concentrated strychnine for limited on-farm use returned as a control measure last year."

The federal Pest Management Regulatory Authority (PMRA) granted an Emergency Registration for strychnine, but it was accompanied with a number of conditions, including that it only be made available in the worst affected areas. As a result, strychnine concentrate is being distributed to 57 rural municipalities in southwestern Saskatchewan. It is available in both dry and freshly mixed high-moisture formulations. Discussions are underway with the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities to expand the list of municipalities eligible to distribute the concentrate.

"The dry baits are intended to remain viable for an indefinite period," says Wilk. "However, the freshly mixed baits have a limited shelf life, and must be used as soon as possible after mixing."

According to Wilk, timing is very important in chemical management of gophers, and early spring is the best time because that's when they emerge from their winter burrows in search of food.

"The males usually emerge first, often well-fed from underground food caches. This is usually in March, although in mild winters they may begin foraging in late February, especially in the southwest," says Wilk. "A few weeks later, the females appear, gaunt and hungry. This makes them more vulnerable targets for toxic baits. Controlling reproductive females will have a more pronounced effect in reducing populations."

Wilk notes that the effectiveness of grain baits can drop below 30 per cent after green growth appears in the spring, and the gophers have more feeding choices.

Some new options for gopher management have become available, including a foam formulation sold under the brand name *Exit*™. This product is injected into the burrow and expands to suffocate the animals in the burrow. It has been used most successfully in smaller areas like sports fields, but its agricultural usefulness may be limited.

(more)

There is also a fumigant containing aluminum phosphide, trade-named *Phostoxin™*. However, this product carries with it a significant health risk for applicators. For this reason, any user must be licensed, which is possible only after taking a specific course available through SIAST. *Phostoxin™* also presents special hazards, requiring appropriately marked storage facilities on and off the farm in the event of a fire.

"Further work is required to evaluate the effectiveness of the various rodenticides, along with other management strategies," says Wilk.

There is more information available on Richardson's ground squirrel management from the Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-866-457-2377.

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SASKATCHEWAN FOREST CENTRE ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE

The next two months are a busy time for the Saskatchewan Forest Centre (SFC), with two major conferences and two management courses on the agenda.

The centre's original mandate from 2001 remains its core mission: to promote the acquisition, creation and dissemination of knowledge to expand Saskatchewan's forest industry in a sustainable fashion.

It operates in a partnership model with numerous organizations, including the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture.

The first conference on the schedule will be held March 12 and 13 in Saskatoon, and is entitled "Designer Trees: Wood Fibre for the Future." The conference objectives are to explore the possibilities that various tree breeding technologies offer for growing trees on farms, to provide information on the national and global situations in the production of wood fibre, and to provide a forum for the discussion of various tree breeding technologies.

"These are issues that have come forward that are important for agroforestry and forest management," said SFC Communications Co-ordinator Joanne Kowalski. "We want to discuss the need for research in tree breeding, because the rest of the world is a bit ahead of us. This is going to provide information for us for a future research program."

The SFC has been examining the prospects for a significant agroforestry industry in Saskatchewan for some time. This conference will be exploring developments in the area of breeding trees with a specific use in mind.

"The canola story is a parallel, as a breeding program that was focused on a specific end-use for a crop," Kowalski said. "Breeding trees in Saskatchewan has focused on their use in shelter belts. As far as for use in plantations, we don't know what clones are best or how we can improve them."

Experts and researchers in tree breeding from across Canada and the U.S. will address the conference.

Then, on April 10 and 11, the centre will host delegates to a Saskatoon conference on "Sustainable Forests: The Role of Vegetation Management with Herbicide." Speakers will present topics related to the manipulation of forest vegetation to regenerate and maintain desired tree species on the landscape, drawing from a wealth of research and trial results.

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"Although herbicides are extensively used in Saskatchewan agriculture, their use in Saskatchewan forest management is a new concept," Kowalski said. "We are hoping to open the door to more science-based discussion."

The SFC also has two agroforestry management courses in the offing.

"These are for growers to learn about herbicides in plantations, management practices, marketing strategies and processing. It will cover the whole gamut, right from when you stick the tree in the ground to when it comes out of the factory as furniture," Kowalski noted.

Full details on the Saskatchewan Forest Centre education and information exchange resources are available on their website at www.saskforestcentre.ca, or by calling (306) 765-2840.

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YORKTON AREA FARM A HAVEN FOR WILDLIFE IN DISTRESS

Touring the Materna family farm on Highway 9 south of Yorkton is like walking into a scene out of "Dr. Doolittle."

A diverse collection of domesticated livestock and pets can be found there, including cattle, donkeys, sheep, llamas and chickens. But the farm also serves as something of a transition house for wildlife that have been rescued from highway accidents or have been orphaned.

Michelle Materna grew up with only a cat and fish for pets. Upon moving from Regina to Fort Qu'Appelle, she began to branch into care for other animals, including dogs, horses and rabbits.

Her first experience with a wild animal was a fox that had been rescued from the demolition of its habitat. At the time, she knew nothing about raising wild animals, but by feeding it like a dog, she nursed the fox back to health. The animal returned to the wild, and Materna never saw it again.

Over the years, she has tended to a wide variety of animals, each requiring its own unique brand of care. With deer, a certain level of taming is necessary, especially when raising young fawns that require bottle feeding. However, Materna says she tries to keep her distance for the most part in order to preserve the animal's wild instincts.

"Once the bottle feeding is over, we try to ignore them," she said. "We put in their feed and their water and everything. They get the odd pat now and then, but other than that, we try to stay away from them."

Materna has similarly raised an orphaned raccoon and several squirrels, all of whom eventually returned to the wild. She also feeds animals that periodically visit the yard, but never develop a relationship with humans. These include approximately 70 deer, a fox, a weasel and a variety of birds.

Materna has learned about each of her species by hearing of the experiences of others who care for animals. She has also passed along her knowledge to many other people.

Because of her abilities with a broad variety of animals, Materna has an open permit to raise any type of animal. For eight years, the Conservation Division of the Ministry of Environment has turned to her with animals that have been rescued.

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Some of Materna's acquisitions occur as a result of human error. She notes that people are far too quick to assume that a young animal has been orphaned. "People don't realize that when they see a little deer lying there, mama's usually not too far away. If you see that the mother has been hit on the road, then take the little one, but other than that, they should be leaving them alone."

Materna advises that if a producer believes an animal is in trouble, they should monitor the situation. If in doubt, they should phone a Conservation Officer at the Ministry of Environment, because the staff are trained and equipped with a network of people who know how to respond. She says the worst mistake people can make is to assume they can provide the necessary care on their own, when they actually know little about the animal's needs.

Materna also regrets when people make the false assumption that they can raise wild animals to become exotic pets. Wild animals require conscientious care. "For the first month or so after you get a little deer, you're kind of tied down. You can't go overnight because they have to be bottle-fed," she noted.

On multiple occasions, she has inherited animals whose human hosts have realized too late that the novelty wears off, and they are unable to provide the level of care the animal demands.

Some of the wild animals brought to Materna by the Ministry of Environment forge bonds with the farm pets and livestock. The raccoon became friends with the dog. The cats love the deer. But generally speaking, the wild animals remain unattached and stay only long enough to receive the care they need before leaving.

Many animals nursed on the Materna farm have become wonderful success stories. Some have had little chance of survival at the outset. Few have been able to express their gratitude, except for a cat named Highway. He was rescued as a kitten from a road kill accident. He survived a broken paw to grow into a giant 20-pound cat, who now reaches up to wrap his front paws around Materna's neck and give her a big hug of thanks.

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LLOYDMINSTER BULL SALE MARKS NINE DECADES

The world was a much different place in 1919.

Robert Borden was the prime minister. William Martin was Saskatchewan's premier. First class postage was two cents. Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin were all the rage on the silver screen. Babe Ruth hit a record 29 home runs for the Boston Red Sox before being traded to the New York Yankees.

And in 1919, one of Canada's premier bull sales was held for the first time in Lloydminster.

Eighty-nine years later, the world has changed a lot, but the Pride of the Prairies Bull Sale is still going strong. The 2008 edition will be held March 9 to 11.

Sam Hardstaff is the Agriculture Manager at the Lloydminster Exhibition. Hardstaff says there is a lot of history in the event.

"This is our 89th year. We've been doing this for some time," he stated.

Cattle prices have gone up and down in the past nine decades, and Hardstaff says the fact that they are currently down a bit has not affected the sale.

"Cattle prices are down, but everybody has lots of cows and needs the bulls to breed them," he noted. "Hopefully those prices will see a bit of an upswing by the time the event rolls around. That's always the hope anyway."

There are over 300 bulls in the sale this year from all over Alberta and Saskatchewan.

"The last few years, we have always had an average of 300 to 350 bulls. We could be down a little bit this year, but I'm not worried. It's our average the last few years," Hardstaff explained.

"Since the drought and BSE, it has come down to a level stand. It's really about the quality, though, and we have the good quality bulls at our show."

There are nine breeds entered in the show, and there will be two rings running on show day on Sunday, March 9.

(more)

"Monday and Tuesday are our sale days. There are 305 bulls entered. All of them are semen-tested. Day one is horned and polled Hereford, Short Horn, Limousin and Black Angus. Day two is Simmental, Gelbvieh and Charolais," Hardstaff said.

There is a special addition to the event this year, with the induction of Dr. Glenn Weir into the Lloydminster Agricultural Hall of Fame. Dr. Weir has been a veterinarian in the Lloydminster area for decades – one of 10 Weirs who have been or are studying to become vets.

Weir, who is now retired, recently told the *Calgary Herald* that being a vet was a calling.

"Behind every animal are people. Who wants to go out at 3:00 a.m. to look at a cow that may not even need any help, or that should have been helped 12 hours ago? I do, because someone needs me, and I can help them," said Weir, whose son Doug and grandson Kent now handle the practice.

Weir looks back on a long career with pride.

"I can say that I have been where I should be. I loved everything about veterinary medicine. I don't have a single bad thing to say about it, and I never have," he stated.

Weir will be inducted on Monday, March 10, at the Stockade Convention Centre.

More information on the show can be found at www.lloydexh.com.

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